Changes in German Vernacular Language (1884)

Abstract

Commenting on contemporary developments in linguistic usage—not in literature but in everyday life—the Kassel lawyer and liberal parliamentarian Otto Bähr (1817–1895) identifies the most important changes in German vernacular language: the decreasing use of French terms, shifting forms of address, the inflation of job titles, and other kinds of hyperbole. As Bähr notes, Germans devoted considerable attention to finding the right language to convey fine distinctions among age cohorts, classes, genders, and those who held greater or lesser authority over other groups in society.

Source

To begin with, two generations ago, the influence of French on our vernacular language was much more noticeable, regardless of whether this was derived from the French current of the previous century or renewed by the French rule of this century. It was quite common, particularly among the lower classes, to say “Bonschur [bonjour]” instead of “Gutentag [good day].” Today this greeting has disappeared. By contrast, the farewell “adieu” (which our language attempted to reshape into the German “Ade” early on, though without real success) is still in use today and persists not least on account of the lack of a similarly simple German phrase for good-bye. Other expressions derived from French were also heard more often in the past—for instance, the saying “Es wurde mir ganz blimmerant (bleu mourant) vor den Augen.” [Everything went black, I blacked out]. One hardly ever spoke of anything other than a “bouteille” of wine. Even in German conversation, some people used the words “peu-a-peu,” “partout,” “doucement,” etc. The expressions “pardon” and “merci” were still widely used. Older gentlemen also still spoke of the “bataille” of Jena or Austerlitz, the “tractement” of the officers, and the “conduite” of the public servants and so on. Moreover, some first names enjoyed the distinction of French pronunciation, and in bourgeois households one could often hear a “Schorsche” or a “Schang” (a George or a Jean) being called for. These and other French words have already disappeared or are disappearing at the moment. Yet in some areas the French language has maintained its dominance. Cooks, with their menus, are most persistent in their use of French. In some aristocratic circles it seems particularly important to sprinkle a great deal of French sounds into one’s speech. […]

[…] Within the last two generations, the most noticeable change in our vernacular language has occurred in forms of address. In the past, they were also ruled much more by the French than they are today. To be sure, one always addressed adult men—insofar as they were deemed worthy of formal address—as “Herr.” It was only when talking to artisans that people used the somewhat more familiar form “Meister” [master], which has reappeared today in the completely different context of the Wagner cult. Young persons aged 14 to 16 years old, however, were called “Musjö” (Monsieur). Considering that “Monsieur,” like all of the titles related to it, such as Monseigneur, Sir, Signore, Senor, etc., derives from the Latin “Senior” (“the older one”), it is indeed a very odd linguistic metamorphosis that in Germany the honorary title “Monsieur” is reserved for the youngest group of men. Today the word “Musjö” is only rarely heard, in which case it is commonly used in a derogatory way (e.g., “A fine Musjö, that one!”). French used to be even more prevalent in addressing women. A girl of lower-class standing, though, was addressed with the German “Jungfer” [spinster, both old and young], while one from the upper classes was called “Mamsell.” The latter would have only been called “Jungfrau” [virgin] in ecclesiastical terms. That is also how she would have been listed in the weekly newspaper on the occasion of her wedding. As a form of address, “Fräulein” [Miss] was exclusively reserved for the daughters of noble families. If they were already of an advanced age, they were called “gnädiges Fräulein” [Madam]. A woman was only

called “Frau” [Mrs.] if that could be supplemented with the title of her husband. And this title was never skipped if one wished to be polite. If, however, the husband did not have a title, then the woman was called “Madam.” Yet the nobility was privileged even in this practice. Noblewomen claimed for themselves the title “gnädige Frau” [your Ladyship]. Over the course of the following decades, numerous changes occurred. The use of “Mamsell,” as well as “Jungfer,” decreased more and more, giving way to “Fräulein.” In earlier days, when adult women were addressed as “Fräulein,” girls would still be called “Mamsellchen.” This practice has also disappeared. A girl aged 12 is now called “kleines Fräulein” [little Miss]. The term “Madam” has been replaced by “Frau,” which is even used without a title but always with the husband’s name. French designations persisted for the longest time on the theater program in Kassel, where ladies were still called “Demoiselle” and “Madam” at a time when the rest of the world already called them something else. Today our maids also receive letters addressed “Fräulein.” The term “Jungfer” is attached to the Kammerjungfer [lady-in-waiting], “Mamsell” to the Probirmamsell [waitress or salesgirl]. “Madam” is used in the vernacular only in instances when neither the title nor the name is known. For example, in the market you can hear the call: “Why not buy some goods, Madam?” Probably the same predicament also prompted the most recent developments in this area. In Berlin’s social circles one is often in a position to converse with ladies without knowing either their exact title or name. So how should one address them? For that very purpose, people seized upon the address “gnädige Frau.” It covers everything and is also advantageous insofar as one avoids stumbling over class titles, which are often cumbersome. And because it is so convenient, one now uses “gnädige Frau” even when the title is known. Having originated in Berlin, this custom has spread and is probably common in all of Germany by now. From this point on, it is only a small step to call any unmarried woman “gnädiges Fräulein.” Obviously, the nobility has fared badly in this entire linguistic advance; it has been deprived of its privilege, as it were. […]

[…] As a pronominal address for the person opposite, the old world knew only the word “Du” [you], accompanied by the corresponding verb conjugation for the second person singular. Advanced politeness has introduced various forms of address in the more modern languages. The word “Du” remains only for the familiar address. For the less familiar address, the French and English languages use the second person plural. In Germany, too, this was commonly practiced with “Ihr.” Even today it remains the prevalent form among our peasants, and two generations ago it was also widely used in cities. You could easily say “Ihr seid” [you are], etc., to any farmer coming in from the countryside or any low-ranking artisan.

Apart from that, however, forms of address derived from the third person, singular and plural alike, were also widely used. As a result, German speakers had four forms of address at their disposal at any time. Anyone not even deemed worthy of “Ihr” was called “Er” [he]. Servants, in particular, were usually addressed with “Er ist” [he is] or “Sie ist” [she is], etc. In the past century, rulers often addressed their subjects, even higher-ranking ones with “Er.” The form “Sie” [formal you], on the other hand, was generally used for persons to whom you intended to give full honors. Over the course of recent generations, the forms “Ihr” and “Er” have increasingly dwindled and only “Du” and “Sie” have remained in common use. If one is not on familiar enough terms with a person as to say “Du,” that person will demand to be addressed with “Sie.” At least this is the case in the city. It is peculiar that this respectful address used to be even more widespread than today. Thus most individuals educated in the early part of this century still addressed their parents with “Sie,” which today has become completely outdated.

Among our farmers the address of “Du” is more widespread than in the city, which is obviously due in part to the fact that villagers know each other far better. The village Jew is among those addressed merely with “Du” and a first name. He has to address the farmer with “Ihr” or “Sie,” however. The farmer uses “Sie” only for persons commanding respect, such as the priest, the mayor, and the people in the city. Unless they say “Du,” farmers address each other with “Ihr” (Hessian: “Dee”), in the second person plural. The children also address their parents in this way, and, frequently, a younger (second) wife will

use the same in talking with her older husband.

In the past, parents were generally called father and mother. Today, in certain circles, even children well beyond adolescence continue to call them “Papa” [Daddy] and “Mama” [Mom]. Perhaps this represents progress in the sense of a well-known Biblical verse.

It is also peculiar that some professional designations have degenerated in their meaning. In the past, it was no problem to call someone a “Schulmeister” [schoolmaster] or an “Advokat” [lawyer]. Both expressions have since taken on a spiteful twist. In order not to rub anyone the wrong way, one had better say “Schullehrer” [school teacher] and “Anwalt” [lawyer]. The word “Schullehrer” is also not quite as popular anymore; our school monarchs usually just call themselves “Lehrer” [teachers] now. The servers in our inns used to be called “Markör” [from the French “marqueur”]; today they are all called “Kellner” [waiters], and the “Oberkellner” [head waiter] shines with particular dignity among them. At any rate, the little word “Ober-” [head-] has a tendency to attach itself nowadays—even apart from the public service where it plays a great role—to all kinds of titles (e.g., “Obergärtner”—head gardener). Yet another degenerated term is “Schuster” [cobbler]. We may still walk on “Schuster’s Rappen” [on “the cobbler’s black horses,” i.e., shoes], but our boots are made by the “Schuhmacher” [shoemaker]. Our tailors, too, like calling themselves “Kleidermacher” [clothiers]. The good old German word “Bauer” [farmer, peasant] seems to be falling victim to a similar fate. Some of our farmers already call themselves “Landwirte” [literally, landkeepers] or “Gutsbesitzer” [landowners]. To set himself apart, the former landowner may possibly call himself “Rittergutsbesitzer” [manorial lord]; the former “Pächter” [leaseholder] (otherwise called “Herr Kondukter”) may possibly become “Domänenpächter” [domain leaseholder]. Today, nobody wants to be a “Dienstmagd” [maid] any more. Our kitchen ladies call themselves “cooks” or “Wirtschafterin” [home economists]; “Hausmädchen” call themselves [female housekeeper], etc. Of course, along with an elevated title comes an elevated sense of what each person is entitled to in life.

Current vernacular language also loves to invoke superlatives. For instance, a pupil at a higher girls’ school “would have liked terribly much to have come if it had not been for etc.” She speaks about her girlfriend: “Elsa XYZ is awfully nice.” The gathering was presented with a “huge layered cake.” The pianist performed “with absolutely astonishing virtuosity.” Likewise, “stupendous,” “grandiose,” and “colossal, phenomenal achievements” have become the order of the day, for which the artist then earns “fabulous applause.” Many things are also “on a huge scale.” In order to express their satisfaction, even four-year-old children speak of “charming” or “cute.” None of this was so in the past.

Source: Otto Bähr, *Eine deutsche Stadt vor hundert Jahren*. New printing of *Eine Stadt vor sechzig Jahren.* With an introduction by Fedor v. Zobeltwitz. Berlin, 1926, pp. 123ff.; reprinted in Werner Pöls, ed., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1815–1870. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 4th ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988, pp. 34–38.

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